

DRAFT NOTES--Not for Circulation Without Permission
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Thoughts on Gorbachev's January Proposal

In terms of comprehensiveness, Gorbachev's proposal has more in common with the Freeze than with traditional arms control measures. It aims at a decisive, radical transformation of the nuclear postures on both sides: a critical increase in stability, at much lower levels, with sharply restricted roles for nuclear weapons.

This applies whether Gorbachev's explicit goal of the total abolition of nuclear weapons is achieved by the end of the century or not, or whether (as I would think more realistic) Phase III is redefined for that time frame as some concept of minimum, stable, restricted deterrence involving from a few dozen to a few hundreds of invulnerable weapons on each side.

In this case, Gorbachev's Phase III--total abolition--would become Phase IV, to be achieved after (probably well after) the year 2000: in a world in which war in general has been delegitimated, and essentially eliminated.

Both these "Phase IV" goals, abolition of nuclear weapons and war itself, are indeed indispensable in the longer run, and not just as inspirational rhetoric. I think it is not "hardheaded" but truly naive to imagine that humanity can coexist with nuclear weapons indefinitely, or abolish them while continuing to expect and practice large-scale war. But to assert that patterns of national sovereignty and international anarchy, conflict and distrust can be broken within 15 years to an extent that would permit the permanent elimination of nuclear weapons is to invite dismissal of the whole proposal as disingenuous "propaganda," as editorials in the New York Times and elsewhere have already proclaimed. Attractive as it is to associate this essential goal with the year 2000, the price in plausibility may well be too high.

In any case Gorbachev's Phases I and II lead directly away--as is urgently necessary--from the current course toward greatly heightened instability, much larger nuclear inventories and expanded roles for nuclear weapons (including strategic defense), all adding up to an irreversible arms race and a higher risk of nuclear war. Somewhat redefined and implemented as suggested in the next two sections, they would eliminate the incentives on either side toward a preemptive first strike in a crisis--maximizing "crisis stability"--and restrict, at last, the function of residual nuclear weapons to the single purpose of deterring nuclear attack. That radical improvement in the security of humanity is achievable by the end of this century.

Needed Modifications of the Gorbachev Plan Phases I and II

To assure that we move toward greater stability (less risk of nuclear war arising out of a crisis or conventional war) Gorbachev's first proposition of a 50% reduction in strategic offensive forces (basically George Kennan's proposal: see Leon Sigal's critique, Foreign Policy, #44, Fall '81) needs to be supplemented or perhaps modified, by specifying types of weapons and particular systems to be removed sequentially. In technical terms, the objective must be to lower the ratio of counterforce warheads to targetable launchers: more generally, to reduce the ability of either side to disarm the other in a preemptive first strike. ("Reduction," per se, would not necessarily achieve this; indeed, some of Reagan's START proposals would actually worsen this ratio, increasing incentives to strike first in a crisis, and thus--given the likely persistence of such crises--raising the risk of nuclear war.)

It would be sound in terms of Soviet security interests for Gorbachev to match his flexibility in his offer to bargain away all the SS-20s by specifying a desire to bargain away all his SS-18s and other heavy MIRVd missiles. Obviously the aim would not be to leave the US with an "advantage"; as with the SS-20s, the proper attitude should be, "What can we get, what must we demand, for giving away all of them?" In effect, the SS-18s, 19s and the new SS-24s (and other new MIRVd ICBMs under development, along with future MIRVd SLBMs comparable to Trident II, D5) should be traded against MX and D5.

I am not proposing that this process be conceived as trading one weapon or set of weapons against another, in the spirit of SALT II. Rather, the objective should be to achieve the elimination in the earliest stages of disarmament of the most destabilizing weapons: accurate, MIRVd ICBMs and SLBMs, which with their counterforce capability both threaten and invite preemptive first strikes. Where this differs from both Reagan's and Gorbachev's formal proposals is in specifying the particular type of weapon or capability that must be foregone or destroyed, rather than merely setting ceilings on numbers and leaving up to each party which systems and capabilities to retain.

Reagan has invited this approach, in a sense, by focussing attention on the SS-18s, and more recently the SS-24s, complaining explicitly about their counterforce, first-strike characteristics. But in fact his START proposals fail to specify or assure that the SS-18s, 19s or 24s be eliminated from Soviet inventories. From the point of view of stability it is desirable that the Soviet threat against US land-based missiles be removed, and disarmament proposals should reflect this more concretely than either START or the new Soviet proposals do.

Even more important, reductions of existing counterforce systems would not be adequate if they were accompanied--as Reagan's START proposals would presume and Gorbachev's current proposal would allow--by the addition of new weapons with counterforce capability, such as SLBMs with the characteristics of the Trident II/D5. Thus it is essential to complement proposals for reductions, such as both sides have now made, with a mutual ban on testing and deployment of new MIRVd missiles, both ICBMs and SLBMs. (Any new missiles can be presumed, from now on, to have counterforce accuracy against hard silos.) This would cover the MX and SS-24, as well as the Trident II/D5 and any future Soviet counterpart.

Recent Soviet leaders have made several proposals to this effect, involving both immediate moratoria on testing and deployment of such missiles--both thoroughly verifiable by existing national means--and permanent, negotiated bans. Such a freeze may be implicit in Gorbachev's latest proposal, but one can only speculate why it is not explicit, as it should be. It may be that Gorbachev preferred to use language as close to Reagan's own as possible, not only on the zero-option for INF but on "reductions", as in his START proposals, to increase the likelihood of a serious response from the Reagan Administration.

But in an attempt to parallel Reagan's own proposals--failing to require a ban at least on new MIRVd missiles, perhaps in keeping with the fact that any hint of a "freeze" is anathema to Reagan--Gorbachev's plan now shares a serious defect with Reagan's START proposals, in its current form. If the Soviets do not quickly correct it, parts of the American antinuclear movement (those elements that take "stability" seriously) could incorporate needed modifications in their own "improved" plan, to be set before Congress, and the U.S. public. They could encourage the Soviets to make comparable clarifications or changes in the Gorbachev proposal, and encourage Congress, the media and the public to be receptive to them.